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The Fetish of Aesthetic

Environmental justice ecocriticism, a term used by T.V. Reed, analyzes the connection between social justice and the environment in the contexts of class, race, gender, and nationality. The environmental movement cannot be properly exercised without also dissecting the social aspects that create a divide between the natural environment and the socially privileged. Reed’s critique of environmental justice ecocriticism illustrates how the disparities in class and race allow for a fetishization of environmental concern.

A privileged distance from the severest impacts of environmental degradation allows for a fetishization of ecological social justice that does not account for those suffering from the aforementioned impacts; it is easy to walk away from an issue that does not have personal, direct impact. When defining the environmental movement, environmental issues are considered on scientific, social, and political planes. Reed argues that there is not enough emphasis on social issues, specifically in social justice; not all people will relate to degradation of nature in the same way. Furthermore, the resistance from those of privilege to acknowledge the effects environmental degradation has on the underprivileged, leads to undermining both the “powerful critique of ecological devastation” (Reed 145) and the environmental movement as a concept. The interactions between society and the environment are necessary in that they are unavoidable, as we all live in the natural world, so it is irresponsible to overlook degradation as something that only affects the socially underprivileged. Despite attempts to create arbitrary boundaries, such as the division of city and nature, environmental destruction does not obey boundaries. Trying to improve environmental conditions has become a predominately upper class, white pastime, where the intention to help the environment has become muddled by the notion of fetishization. This notion of fetishization allows for aesthetic and profit can be created.

According to Reed, “[a]esthetic appreciation of nature has not only been a class-coded activity but the insulation of the middle and upper classes from the most brutal effects of industrialization has played a crucial role in environmental devastation” (Reed 151). In this excerpt, Reed’s use of the word ‘insulation’ rather than ‘isolation’—or something of the like—changes the way in which those of higher privileged interact with those of less. According to the Oxford Dictionary, isolation is “to cause a person to remain alone or apart from others” (Oxford Dictionary Isolate), whereas insulation is “protecting something form unpleasant influences or experiences” (Oxford Dictionary Insulate). In this distinction, Reed is suggesting that those who can afford to appreciate nature’s aesthetic as a ‘class-coded activity’ feel as though they are worth being protected, subconsciously or not. Because environmental destruction knows no boundaries, the privileged can be protected, but they cannot be isolated, which makes more convincing in the ability to have protection as insinuating superiority. Those who can be protected, are able to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of nature, because they do not need to fear environmental detriment. Aesthetic appreciation has then become a way to fetishize the environmental movement by the privileged, rather than the privileged having true intention of helping the environment. Class and race is what allows the privileged to choose what parts of the environment are worth appreciating or destroying, as Reed states by addressing humans as connected to nature through this paradox (Reed 150).

In Sigmund Freud’s essay “Fetishism”, Freud defines the paradox of fetish as a recognized abnormality, but also as being seldom felt “as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering” (Freud 1). Freud determines that the adherents of the fetish are, usually, satisfied with and even praise their fetish, as it is a way to ease their erotic lifestyle (Freud 1). He then continues by saying fetishes are often derived from contrary ideas, where “the divided attitude shows itself in what the fetishist does with his fetish, whether in reality or in his imagination” (Freud 4). This definition of fetishism can be seen clearly in the discrepancies of those of privilege who are participating in the environmental movement. In this disparate power dynamic, the fetishist is able to justify their performative luxuries. Reed uses the commodification of sunsets and barns to exemplify this point, similar to the way in which John Muir compared the sublime and the picturesque. To Muir, the picturesque was simply natural beauty that matched predetermined standards of aesthetic, whereas the sublime was an anthropocentric view of nature.

For Reed, the sunset and barns, stereotypes of rural America, are a picturesque interpretation of nature that are able to create profit for those who have the tools and language to do so. Reed says, “The process of commodification has been inadvertently furthered by he kind of aestheticization found in much of ecocritcism” (Reed 151), and goes on to explain that “aesthetic appreciation of nature has precisely masked the effects of environmental degradation” (Reed 151). Scientifically, pollution—specifically trapped aerosols—contribute to beautiful sunsets (Ballantyne), however the aesthetic of the sunset is what is profitable, not the pollution and environmental degradation. The constant reassurance of profitable aesthetic empowers the privileged to continue living their alluring lifestyle (similar to Freud’s aforementioned ‘erotic’ lifestyles). The word ‘masked’ used by Reed is especially important in distinguishing the temporary effects of this empowerment. It is in this “mutually incompatible assertion” (Freud 4) of false concern for environmental degradation, that the privileged are refusing to delve into the issues affecting the natural world. Eventually, the real effects of this false concern will be prevalent in future environmental deterioration.

It is worth mentioning that Reed’s discussion of environmental justice is paradoxical in and of itself. As an educated, white man of privilege he is, at the very least, not reversing the polarization of environmental justice by continuing the conversation in an academic realm. He critiques another ecocriticism essay for not writing with “urgency” and the need of a multiplicity of voices to begin to address the divide of privilege and the natural world. He questions why “we will have to wait for those connections to be made after a ‘diversity of voices is encouraged to contribute to the discussion’” (Reed 146), where the connections he refers to are between the environment and social justice. Yet, he fails to acknowledge that his critique is didacticism that criticizes other didacticism as a means of thinking it’s diagnosing or solving a problem.

In conclusion, Reed’s critique of environmental justice ecocriticism lays the groundwork for discussing the fetishism of the natural world by those of privilege. In a disparate power dynamic, there is only place for a certain race or socioeconomic bracket to effectively have a conversation and express true care of the natural world’s preservation, when in fact it’s a performative luxury not accessible to those of less privilege.

**Epilogue**: The study of literature and the environment impacts the way I looked at the natural world in its entirety. Prior to this class I thought the environment and nature could only be looked at through a scientific lens. However, now I realize that I was naïve in believing that. There is no better way to connect and learn about nature than to incorporate the non-science environment to the science environment. Specifically, by analyzing poetry I learned about the intention of language and how that can inspire everyone to be more connected to nature. Through authors like Thoreau, I learned to think more broadly and deepen my curiosity.

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